

Achieving the Dream initiative works on many fronts to bolster students' success

If your mission is to expand access and success in postsecondary education, why focus on community colleges – the sector of higher education typically overlooked by the media and often misunderstood by the public? Simple; because that's where the students are – especially the students who face the most barriers to success: those in historically underserved populations.

According to figures from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the nation's nearly 1,200 community colleges account for 46 percent of all undergraduate enrollment – 11.6 million students. This total includes high concentrations of low-income students, students of color and students who are the first in their families to attend college. All of these facts make it abundantly clear why Lumina Foundation for Education has

made Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count a multiyear priority.

Achieving the Dream began in 2004 with Lumina funding and is now at work on 35 community college campuses in seven states. It is a partnership initiative involving 10 national organizations, including two other grant-making organizations: KnowledgeWorks Foundation and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. It also involves dozens of campus leaders, practitioners and researchers; community and business representatives; and education policy-makers. Its overall aim is to improve educational outcomes for at-risk students at two-year institutions.

College access may form the core of Lumina's mission, said Leah Meyer Austin, the Foundation's senior vice president for research and programs, but helping students to persist and succeed once they enroll is inextricably linked. And the students Lumina is most intent on helping – under-

served, ethnically diverse and nontraditional – are the chief reason community college enrollment is swelling.

"It was a natural because so many of these students, for a variety of reasons, begin their education in community colleges," said Austin. Even so, when the Foundation first floated the idea that would become Achieving the Dream, "a lot of people thought we were nuts," Austin added.

Lumina took the first step toward dispelling that notion in 2003 when it convened a symposium to discuss how community colleges might be the focus of efforts to improve student access and success. All seemed to agree that improvements are needed. Growing numbers of students are arriving at the door of higher education with lower incomes and lower levels of academic preparedness; too few are staying in school, succeeding and graduating; and community colleges are the point of entry for millions of such students.

Carol Lincoln, a senior staff associate with



Carol Lincoln
of MDC

Five major strands of Achieving the Dream's work

- **Promote and sustain institutional change:** Achieving the Dream will help community colleges build a "culture of evidence" and an unwavering commitment to improving success rates for underserved students. Colleges will strengthen their capacity to assess student outcomes, set goals for improvement and track changes. They will systematically analyze data, develop effective strategies for improving student success, cultivate support for the strategies, and institutionalize new policies and practices that work.
- **Develop policy:** Achieving the Dream will work at three levels to foster policies that

support community college student success: state, national and in regional accreditation agencies.

- **Engage the public:** To improve outcomes for students at Achieving the Dream colleges and beyond, the initiative must inform and mobilize many people – including community college administrators, faculty, staff, trustees and students; state and national policy-makers and opinion leaders; local leaders in Achieving the Dream communities; funding organizations, and employers.
- **Build knowledge:** With its focus on data-driven decision making, Achieving the Dream will be in a unique position to build and share knowledge about student outcomes and the factors that affect student

success. By evaluating the work and sharing the lessons it affords, the initiative will enhance the knowledge of community college leaders, policy-makers, higher education researchers, funding organizations and others.

- **Enhance partners' capacity:** In addition to prompting change in colleges, policies, public will and knowledge, Achieving the Dream expects to bring about change in its own partner organizations. Through participation in the initiative, partner organizations are expected to enhance their capacity and commitment to work individually and collectively to advance the initiative's goals.

Source: Achieving the Dream's 'Integrated Action Plan'

ACHIEVING THE DREAMSM

COMMUNITY

COLLEGES

COUNT

MDC, the North Carolina nonprofit organization that serves as the managing partner for Achieving the Dream, offered a thoughtful assessment of the situation. "Community colleges were created as places where anyone can get started on higher education, and they do a good job of providing opportunity. But they're not doing a good enough job of moving students all the way to credentials and degrees." Lincoln said that two-year colleges must improve instruction and curriculum and bolster support services such as tutoring and counseling so they can "make good on the commitment to help every student succeed."

The best place to start, according to the initiative's partner organizations, was to adopt a data-driven model to foster improvement. Community colleges have long used data to monitor student and academic trends, but rarely as part of a systemic effort to enhance student success.

"We haven't been oblivious (to data); we've taken a lot of steps in the past to create early-warning markers and to emphasize advising," said Terrance Suarez, president of Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap, Va. "But sometimes you lose track of what becomes of those steps over time. Now we have to take a systematic, long-range approach."

Commitment to the long-range view is one critical component of Achieving the Dream. Another component is a commitment to the seemingly incongruous combination of cooperation and autonomy. This combination applies not only to the 35 colleges now participating (Page 10), but also to the 10 organizations that form the Achieving the Dream partnership (see list at right).

By nature and by habit, community colleges are independent institutions that serve

regional constituents rather than state and national ones. Achieving the Dream embraces this independence. "We don't say to colleges: 'Here are five criteria to examine; start from here,'" Austin said. "We ask them to look at their own data and to disaggregate the data and to use that analysis to determine which direction the initiative should take (on their campus). That's been a philosophical underpinning from the beginning. People and institutions own their own goals."

Still, as colleges incorporate Achieving the Dream into their institutional cultures, questions remain about whether the factions within each school will truly take ownership

of the initiative or simply view it as the "flavor of the month," another well-intended but short-lived reform effort.

So far, faculty members at Broward Community College in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and other Achieving the Dream schools seem to have embraced the initiative's aims. Debbie Nycz, president of Broward's faculty senate, suggests there is one way to get everyone on board.

"There will be a trickle-up effect when the faculty starts seeing more students

who can read, do math and navigate the system better," she predicted.

Austin cautions that the scope of the initiative is not limited to a single slice of the community college population. Nor is it limited to on-campus efforts. In addition to the more visible "in-the-trenches" efforts among faculty and students, there are facets of vitally important work taking place in other areas. First, organizations involved in the initiative work actively with elected officials and education policy-makers to improve higher education



Terrance Suarez
of Mountain Empire
Community College

Seeking improvement
in attainment rates
at two-year institutions

45%

Nationally, of community college students who seek an associate's degree or higher, 45 percent earn an associate's or bachelor's degree or transfer to a four-year institution within six years.

41%

Nationally, of students enrolled in a certificate program (study oriented toward a particular job or industry), 41 percent achieve that goal, earn a degree or transfer to a four-year institution within six years.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES (2001). *Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study 1996-2001* (BPS:96/01). Analysis by Community College Research Center.

Achieving the Dream's partner organizations

- American Association of Community Colleges
- Community College Leadership Program, University of Texas-Austin
- Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University
- Jobs for the Future
- KnowledgeWorks Foundation
- Lumina Foundation for Education
- MDC
- MDRC
- Nellie Mae Education Foundation
- Public Agenda